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Tips on Writing an Exposé for a Seminar Paper in International Law

You have chosen to write a seminar paper. The first step in this process is to create an exposé (proposal). This document serves two main purposes. First, it helps you clarify the question, objectives, scope, effort and methodology of your seminar paper, allowing you to develop and reflect on your project more effectively. Second, it provides your supervisor with the information needed to identify any gaps or issues in your proposal.

To ensure clarity and readability, it's important to write in complete sentences and maintain an objective tone. Practice has consistently shown that a strong proposal leads to high-quality seminar papers. The more thoroughly you engage with the relevant content from the outset, the better your final result is likely to be. Therefore, take the preparation of your proposal seriously.

The suggested structure for your proposal is as follows:

- page 1: title page (include your name, contact details, title of the paper and date),
- pages 2 and 3: actual proposal (maximum 2 pages),
- concluding: bibliography and outline (maximum 2 pages).

Note

Before you begin the research and writing process for your exposé, you should familiarize yourself with the **Binding Guidelines for Writing a Paper in International Law**. The guidelines listed there are already binding for your exposé as well and provide valuable information for conducting research and structuring your work.

Additionally, creating a comprehensive mind map (or another form of visual overview) of your initial thoughts and what may potentially relate to your topic can be very helpful for capturing the complexity of the research problem and can equally contribute to narrowing down your research process.

Introductory Reading

- [Eliav Lieblich, How to Do Research in International Law? A Basic Guide for Beginners, Harvard International Law Journal.](#)
- [Ali Phipps, How to Write an Essay – Transcript.](#)

Introduction and Problem Definition

The section on “Introduction and Problem Definition” aims to clarify the relevance of your topic and the focus of your paper. Why is the problem you intend to analyze and address significant? What makes it worth your attention? Remember, as you write your seminar paper and proposal, you are not just crafting it for yourself but for your reader. Consider starting with an intriguing case, a thought-provoking question or thesis, or a (provocative) quote to draw the reader in.

Research Question(s)

After discussing the existing problems in the first section, develop the research question(s) and working hypotheses you will use to tackle the issue at hand. This is a crucial part of your proposal. A good research question is logical, clearly defined, concise and problem-oriented. This focus helps you avoid aimless descriptive passages, ensuring that your paper only contains statements that contribute to answering the research question. The chosen question should be answerable within the scope of your planned work but should also not be trivial.

State of Research

Once you have articulated your research question, it's important to compare it with the current state of research. Which existing works have addressed your question but come to different conclusions? Are there any studies that cover a particular aspect of your question but do not offer completely aligned answers? Consider what prior works already exist and how you can utilize them. Please limit this section to a few key works that are most relevant. Please organize this section by content and topics, not by authors.

You may also choose to reverse the order of the research question and the state of research. In this case, outline the current state of research first, identify a gap, and then formulate a corresponding question to fill that gap with your work.

Expected Results

Although you cannot present a final and comprehensive result at this early stage, you should offer certain (preliminary) assessments regarding the anticipated outcomes. State these expectations clearly. Additionally, outline what contribution your paper can make to the field. You may refer back to the “State of Research” section for context.

Methodology

Methodology serves as the tool for gathering and organizing the information required to address your research question. Generally, you will approach your paper as a legal thesis, employing conventional legal methodologies – specifically, interpreting legal norms through established methods of interpretation. Engaging with relevant literature is essential in this process, so familiarize yourself with the current discourses in international law.

Bibliography (Selection)

After briefly addressing the essential literature in the “State of Research” section, this part involves compiling a bibliography. Include not only the works you have mentioned previously but also other significant ones. Textbooks typically do not belong in this section.

Preliminary Outline

An outline will evolve throughout your research process. However, a preliminary outline provides a starting point for your work on the topic and is crucial for obtaining targeted feedback from your supervisor. Aim for an outline that does not exceed three or a maximum of four levels.